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The Daniloff affair: a national disgrace

The deal that Washington made with Moscow to free Nick Daniloff is, from the American standpoint, an unmitigated disgrace. From the Soviet vantage point, the episode is a triumph.

The administration's natural desire to liberate an innocent American from a KGB prison cell reflected the sentiments of the nation at large — the concern of the American people for the captive journalist was real and heartfelt.

But permitting a linkage of any sort between the fate of Daniloff, an innocent victim of a KGB frame-up, and that of Gennady Zakharov, an accused spy, has had the inevitable effect of legitimating and rewarding Soviet coercion.

Nick Daniloff is no spy. The U.S. knows this. Moscow knows it. And President Reagan, in a rare personal letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, said — indeed pledged — just that: Daniloff is not an American agent.

What he is — as Secretary of State George Shultz reiterated yesterday — is a hostage; an American citizen seized by the Kremlin in order to force Washington to alter its conduct toward an accused Soviet agent.

And that, in fact, is just what happened. Moscow won.

This case may well instruct future adversaries as to how and why — when dealing with the U.S. government — hostage-taking can work.

Indeed for Shultz — in the course of explaining what Washington will do with Zakharov, in return for Daniloff's release — actually to have acknowledged that the *U.S. government still considers Daniloff a hostage*, is nothing short of extraordinary.

It represents a virtual invitation to Moscow to take an American hostage — a journalist, a ballet dancer, whatever — any time the FBI nabs a Soviet spy over here.

The only thing more extraordinary, in this whole affair, is the Soviet Union's

sheer gall — not to speak of the U.S. government's abject capitulation.

All this from an administration headed by Ronald Reagan? Jimmy Carter might well have showed more backbone.

The details of the U.S.-Soviet deal are of little consequence — though it's interesting to note that Washington agreed, not just to a linkage between the two cases, but to absolutely parity: Daniloff to the custody of his ambassador, Zakharov to the custody of his.

A perfect equation — between a veteran correspondent for *U.S. News and World Report* and a Soviet UN employe who'd been paying thousands of dollars, over several years, for what he believed to be classified military documents.

There may well be, down the road, an attempt by the U.S. to cloud the transaction: to trade Zakharov for, say, a famous Soviet dissident (with Nick Daniloff's return home, a sidebar to the swap).

But who, even then, will be fooled by the camouflage? What happened in this affair is plain.

The only thing left to hope for, in this whole unhappy business, is that Washington's surrender was prompted — largely, at least — by humanitarian considerations. Let's hope, in other words, that Daniloff's personal wellbeing was the administration's dominant concern.

That, to be sure, would be disquieting in itself. But not nearly so troubling as the possibility that Washington's capitulation was animated by a desire not to scuttle the Shultz-Shevardnadze talks — or, heaven forbid, the Great Event: the Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

For if the administration is so anxious for a U.S.-Soviet diplomatic rapprochement that it's prepared to abandon principle altogether — as well as any sense of *realpolitik* — then the ship of state is indeed in dire straits.